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Remembering past distance: whaling and whalers

Brooke Grasberger¹

Abstract

Coastal zones are places of permanent bleed and shift, whether sudden and swift or slow and shallow. This experimental paper takes the coast — broadly conceived — as a site for a reflection on historical writing and historical memory, following the history of whales and whaling. Its three sections, one on the sun-stricken waters and hidden whaling stations of Adventure Bay in Tasmania (“time and the tryworks”), one on the ice-thick Arctic and the wreck of the whaleship *Helen Mar* (“holding ocean”), and the last on the oil-dripping skeleton of a blue whale held in the New Bedford Whaling Museum (“scent of undried bones”), make the at once impossible and inescapable attempt to touch the past through writing through touch; what makes itself known; what is only a seeming; and that each of these things is inevitably the other.

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On the coast everything moves; sometimes toward

Often in writing history it seems some essential thing has been severed. I think. I touch a journal, a manuscript, knowing that other hands have written it, unable to feel their imprint besides the trace of text. It’s not just the definitive endings that separate the two or more of us, it’s the whole sense and feeling of the world, that world, still linked to *now* on a rusting and growth-encrusted chain – but – submerged. So, in writing, I must make a kind of chart; could it be one that might at once delineate, make clear, and hold open those lines for ceaseless shift? I may or must remember, incompletely, where I’ve never been, and some of what I can never know.

time and the tryworks, or;

Adventure Bay is the name of both a town and a bay on Bruny Island, separated from the mainland of Tasmania by the D’Entrecasteaux Channel. For two decades of the nineteenth century, following British invasion of Tasmania in 1803, it was one of the homes of Tasmanian shore whaling, a short-lived slaughterous enterprise also made possible by the migration and calving journeys undertaken by southern right whales. The whaling station remained active until around 1850.²

With the sun, the shallows of the bay are a bright teal-shaded blue, so clear that a seal swimming over the sand is visible even before its water-sleek head breaks the surface. Eucalyptus trees and spike-flowering banksia hover around the shore’s edges, reaching toward sand and rounded stone alike as the

¹ Sea Education Association.

² Michael Nash, *The Bay Whalers: Tasmania’s shore-based whaling industry*.

geographic composition of the littoral shifts from the inner curve of pale beach to the rockier horns of the bay.

The whaling station was, and its remains are, on the eastern side of the bay where the dark round stones rise into the scrubby woods that perch on boulders and sandy soil all the way up to the pillared promontory known as the Fluted Cape. The ruins lie just off a hiking trail that loops around the cape, easy access for recreational visitors. Plastic signs, rising odd and angled from the otherwise planes of the woods, made noticeable, describe the station and diagram the remnants.

If the signs are easy to see – impossible to miss, even – the ruins themselves are not. They're hard to see, hard to look for, hard to imagine between the ribbon-trunked eucalyptus trees and their claw-shaped leaves, the brilliant clarity of the bay itself. Birdcall and wavelets, wind through grass and leaves. Can you stand on this shore, and absorb what you're told? The invaders' songs and shouts, reek of blood and burning fat, muscles straining to row and cut and haul, throng of unwelcome predators? Foundations hidden by leaves. The place where the try pots stood, now bare of metal. All devoured by the distance burned into the ground by the wheeling sun – disinfected by that irradiating light.

Shore whaling brought the infrastructure of the whale fishery ashore (*again*, as whaling had been born on shores across the world). The thirty-year bloom and bleed of it in the Tasmanian context, part of the ravenous grind of British colonialism and capital which consumed its own people in droves and nearly accomplished a genocide against the island's Indigenous inhabitants – also caught up in the shore whaling industry, through the appropriation of land, kidnap, massacre – spread down the eastern coast from Bicheno

in the north to Port Davey in the southwest. As shore whaling stations they were often isolated places, inhabited only by a few. The size of Adventure Bay town today is one such indication – a street barely wide enough to be called a main with buildings that almost never rise above one story.³

The reason shore whaling came to these places is double: British imperial expansion, its search for penal colonies to dispose of unruly laborers from home territories and across its empire, and that southern right whales used (and now use again, though in much diminished crowds) the coasts of Tasmania and southern Australia across the Bass Strait for shelter and giving birth in the course of their peripatetic lives. These enclosed bays and harbors were made homes to them after centuries of migration, learning their contours and returning to them year after year, remembering. Right whales are baleen feeders, sucking ocean water in through plates that filter krill, so they have the distinguishing swooping jawline with their eyes low down on their body just above where the jaw begins. Once they reach the encircling arms of the shallows, they can rest their powerful bodies, and be at ease. If you had come upon them quietly, in one of those moments, you could look them in the eye, and be seen. But their presence in the shallows also signifies oil.

Once the pods of whales are spotted from the stone-supported platform, the whaleboats are sent out after them. Six men to a boat: the machine made by the efforts of their arms, the wood, the water, all moving against their original inclinations, can lock with practice into a vector like an arrow's flight. The boat can seem to rise up out of the water when they hit their speed, when the whale is spotted by spout or fins and they have to row into harpoon-range. Whales, once hit, will dive

³ Nash, *The Bay Whalers*, 54; Shayne Breen, "Extermination, extinction, genocide: British colonialism and Tasman aborigines," in *Forgotten Genocides: oblivion, denial, memory*.

to try to escape this swarming surface threat. The harpoon's line is rigged to run down the boat's center to keep an even keel, and is dipped in water so it doesn't burn with the speed of the whale's frantic dive away from the stinging shard lodged (*ideally*) in the joint of its fins. Deeper and deeper, down to where these oar-winged birds couldn't possibly follow.

Perhaps, before this particular hunt, the whalers had been out before and captured one of the smaller, weaker calves. This was a hunting practice that they'd found effective time after time; take the calves and the adults will follow, drawn in as inexorably as the whalemen have been to her.⁴ Pursuing.

(This has happened before, she knows. Others have gone the way she is going, chasing the lost into the sharp-toothed shallows, and they in the main have not returned. The few that have are different, wounded, wary. Still she goes on and on. Ocean floor rises until she is made a dark and delimited shape against its bright sand and blue. Shadows of the whaleboats caught in the corner of her dark brown eye. Out come the splinters.)

Her breath turns to blood; she too is lost.

Hunters, sweating and shaking, tie her on, take on the burden of the body, vacated of life and still dripping fluids. Now she, transformed by harpoons, becomes part of the machinery of the whaleboat. Water slaps against the planking, against the broad and shining corpse. The tight circular motion that makes the oar dive into the water in just the right way has to drive against the water and the dead weight behind. A glance back at the whale and the water-shining skin – perhaps a glimpse of distinctive callus-growths, and the trail of blood fanning out into the boat's slim wake. A reminder to keep rowing: the iron of her blood is magnetized. As it spreads through the water in diffusing clouds, sharks are drawn to her.

Each chunk they tear from her body is bitten into the wages the whalers will receive when the trying-out is done and she is transformed, again, into fuel.

But the reach of her magnetism is greater than even this. She has pulled this enterprise, these people, here on ships traveling across the strait or across the Pacific, their designs and desires. And the greatest cluster of all the things she pulls to her is at the station itself. The whalers, exhausted and soaking still, haul her out of the water to keep her flesh away from maritime scavengers. Now she is flensed by the men of the station, moving as fast as they can because the specter of spoilage is always creeping up behind them – blubber, so valuable, rots at speed when the creature it encased is dead – and with it the process of further damage to their meagre wages. They take axes to her mouth, cutting out the baleen through which she filtered her food. The baleen is cleaned to prepare it for its commercial uses, while the strips of blubber are taken to the trypots to be rendered down into oil. The fires themselves are also fueled with blubber, so the smoke that rises from beneath the iron pots is oily, fatty, clinging to the skin and throat. The men who take shifts keeping the oil constantly astir with a chain (it needs this attention to keep from losing its quality) are coated head to foot in it.⁵ Sharks circle in the bay, hoping for bites out of new whales before they can be levered out of reach. Gulls and other seabirds wait for their chance overhead, diving down when they see easy access.

Thousands of times the tryworks are lit, so that the smoke comes to live in the soil and water that surrounds them. The marine populations of the area have changed, as sharks wait for the boats to return with the meat, and other scavengers (like crabs) come for the

⁴ Ibid., 24

⁵ Ibid., 22-23

leavings. Birds are thicker overhead, and the trees are sparser.

And then, within the span of a few years, this bloody flurry and struggle is gone.

The great part of Tasmanian whaling stations were forgotten, for a while. Fire revealed one, in the late twentieth century. In the 1990s archaeological work on them begin, along with the process of integrating this history back into the Tasmanian consciousness. Even today, however, the exact number of whaling stations is not known, a forgetting aided by the long separation between their purpose and their surroundings.

A person can't just stand on the beach and *know*. There are things that must be learned first.

- (1) The bay ringed in heavy, fatty smoke, saturated with myriad scents of death. Sharp fins circling in the bloody water. Boats hauled up on shore, sweat and shouting, and the whole crowned with rings of birds.
- (2) The bay rippling gently beneath the late-summer sun, patterns of light and color like a cracked-open opal. Hikers on the beach, adventure boats offshore that race at forty knots right up to the rocky coastline and through its arches and narrows, sides painted shades of bright fire.
- (3) These things are the same; they are alive at once – when I touch the water I touch summer, I touch blood. Beneath surfaces the past still lives, even the placid quiet of a shallow bay, and they are linked by other tethers that seem less obvious. Never untouched.

⁶ Jay Dolin, *Leviathan*, 370.

holding ocean, or;

Throughout the nineteenth century the whaling stocks, under multiple pressures, dwindled further and further in the nearer seas

–

Yes. No. It's this. Graphing midcentury peaks, echoing the city skylines that the whalers helped raise, the industry and profit and collapse of it, the owners and financiers. Gauging and measuring, advertising and label-making, gas lamps and corsetry. Up goes the smoke and smudges the wall behind: essential, a continually unfolding chain of consequence and ruin.

It's not just this. The seeds of these choking trees, dense and contained, are the encounters between whales and their hunters. Whichever way the influence runs, this is its essential core, and it built over the course of the nineteenth century.

The whales learned as their numbers diminished, and they withdrew. Scarce and scattering. Some hunters described them as shy: coast-shy, shallow-shy, ship-shy. The fleets followed, as they could. For many, and then especially American whaleships this hunt meant first the rounding of Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope to exploit the Pacific whaling grounds, and then the push further and further north into the life-rich, mutable seas of the Arctic.⁶

Unlike the swells and peaks of other seas, the Arctic has teeth. In more open seas the wind may strain the sails nearly to pieces and blow the ship off course, the waves smash over the deck and sometimes sweep men away, but these injuries or incidents are not often catastrophic. The most dangerous alignment of forces for a ship (generally speaking) is a lee shore, when the wind blows from the sea to the land, driving any ship caught in it toward the shallows and shoals that crowd close to the shore. And here in the north these sharp shores are gathered

in the depths of the sea, not at its shallowing limits.

As they had done elsewhere and at other times, the whales of the Arctic – bowheads, for the most part, being the primary target of whale hunting in the region, but also grey whales and humpbacks and others – retreated further into the ice. They pushed northward just as the whalers did, seeking refuge deeper and deeper in the freezing water and thick-clustering floes which at their tightest are called *the pack*.

In the pack the ice is not just a navigational hazard. It damages the wooden ships that pass through it in somewhat predictable ways, piercing through the planking to let the freezing water pour in and force the carpenter and his mates to stand knee-deep pumping water and mending the breach. It reaches out with grasping chill, seeking the least trace of liquid to freeze and then perhaps crush. Absorbs the ship into its expanding self. Being enclosed in the ice was not unexpected, but once the ship was gripped entire then it could be flung high above the water on sheaves of ice or shoved down below it. And here below, surfacing to spray mist that rises like smoke above the mazelike fissures, are the whales.

Once the flags of vapor are spotted, out go the boats, men lowered as they are elsewhere only wrapped in heavier skins. Oars muffled to prevent the whales from hearing the cut and splash through the more communicative medium of the water. The men pursue the whales through the ice, muscle memory imported from other seas. If caught, the corpses are sometimes towed back to ships and sometimes cut in on the ice floes themselves – in dire straits (not an uncommon thing), the men would sleep on the ice and strip the blubber there, towing the floating cuts of it back whenever they are able. Ship and shore

fused. Ice-walking bears look eagerly to the leavings of the hunt, willing even to approach, to taste, the ships that bristle with guns often used at their expense.⁷

Despite the history of violence, the persecution and flight, that lived between whales and pelagic hunters, other angles of approach still remained possible, and seem in some instances to be held dear: “Casting my eyes below I saw the whale under water, coming towards the ship’s broadside. She was beautifully distinct, and slow in motion. She slightly touched the vessel, yet the concussion made her tremble as though we had struck a heavy piece of ice. We soon got the whale killed and flensed...”⁸

Elsewhere and elsewhere...

(lost in the drift of it)

...everything repeats.

Seasonal cyclings of expansion and contraction. In the space of a day the pack, hunting, may find a ship and surround it, clutch and then release, fall away, recede, return, clutch at the ship again. Crack and constrict it.

In a certain moment of its wandering, the ice north of the Bering Strait found the barque *Helen Mar* busy with work. A whale’s corpse floated beside her, the men employed in cutting into the flesh and peeling down the long strips of blubber to feed the try pots. Masts and men alike are coated in rime like a disease trying to work its way beneath the skin and wood to strike and crack at the heart. The ice crept closer, its intent unread – by whose failure or deception it is impossible to know. Did the lowering clouds, ridding the liquid and frozen seas of contrast, disguise their movement? Did exhausted eyes miss the gradual certainty of its approach?

The ice approaches, passes the threshold: *too late*. Only then it is noticed, two floes

⁷ William Barron, *Old Whaling Days*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

converging on the *Helen Mar*. The air electrifies with the collective shock of the crew, and the sudden sharp confusion and turmoil that comes from wrenching body and mind from one all-consuming process (cutting-in) to another (escape). All this takes time: to lower the boats, and climb down to them, with exhausted and aching arms, heads dizzy with hours of constant work. This time, the ice is faster.

Only five whalers escaped from the crew of forty, because they were able to climb the masts and escape the shattering crack of the collision. In the crush, the apex of these colliding assemblages, these striving vectors finally meet and lose themselves in the devastation of each other. Five of them left, adrift on the sudden coast. They're contained here, forever, the memory not truly held by them but by what the ice clutched in those last few moments.⁹

But most of these Arctic memories, ice-held (for how long?), had much different results. The bowhead whales, with their recurved mouths and dark-brown eyes, were harpooned to death (with bomb-harpoons as time wore on), processed through the tryworks, and brought back to far southern latitudes. The disassembled whales *seem* to vanish, swallowed into more southerly cities like the men swallowed, whole or in pieces, by the Arctic. But the ice and the frigid sea remained.

Now that the ice is continuing to melt at a rapid rate, a wound that bleeds without cessation, the range of its shifting landscapes will grow more and more constrained. The tankers and cargo ships may be moving through here soon enough, having waited long enough for their various ancestors and antecedents to finally burn the Northwest Passage into permanent existence.

scent of undried bones; or

American whaling, the widest-spread and most devastating of the nineteenth century, was centered for a time in the port city of New Bedford, with its deep, protected harbor suited for calling the oil-laden ships back in from the hunt. Eventually drawing in whalers not just from the Americas but from Cape Verde and beyond, the whaling industry changed the human demographics and cultures of the shore and the cetacean demographics and cultures of the sea, and charged American capitalism in a literal and metaphorical sense, providing both lamp-light for working regardless of the hour and the profit to power further production.

Now this history is memorialized, displayed, interpreted, preserved, unsettled, at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, which sits on a hillside separated from the water by the wide grey stripe of a major road. The museum opened in 1903, explicitly designed to capture and retain the vision of whaling as the idealized quintessence of Anglo-Yankee masculinity, and though it has evolved and expanded over its century of existence, its location in New Bedford has not changed.¹⁰

The main entrance to the museum opens up into a high-ceilinged atrium that is not arching and empty as these often are but cluttered with replicas of whale organs and hung with bones and lit-up papier-mâché whaleforms. The space can't be dominated by any one thing, filled as it is with all the splayed figures, but the single largest presence in the room is the hanging skeleton of a male blue whale. It isn't a remnant of New Bedford's own regime of the hunt, but the remains of a juvenile struck and killed by a tanker off Nova Scotia in 1998. Its body, unseen in stormy conditions, was struck by another tanker and

⁹"Crushed in the Arctic ice: thirty-five of the crew of the whaler *Helen Mar* lost." *New York Times*, November 7, 1892.

¹⁰James Lindgren, "'Let us idealize old types of manhood': The New Bedford Whaling Museum, 1903-1941." *The New England Quarterly*, June 1999.

carried on its bow into the hollow of Rhode Island Sound.¹¹ An accident! That this creature should be struck and killed and struck again, unthinkingly propelled hundreds of miles –

Between the span of its life and this the fixed place of its afterlife is the suspended time of its death and dissolution. When its body was discovered rolling against the bow of the *Botany Triumph* it became a lightning rod, one landscape of force and intent (where swimming? where steering?), of striving, succeeded by another. “Some of the men had tears in their eyes,” a journalist covering the discovery wrote.¹² The whale was towed to Second Beach in Middletown, Rhode Island, where journalists and scientists descended to wonder at the dislocated body slowly rotting on the sand.

The flensing knives were wielded now by marine scientists, muscle memory of whaling sparked to life again. Stripping the whale now to learn from the colors of its skin and muscle, its alien-huge carcass. Larynx by minivan to Mount Sinai Hospital, samples of muscle to Providence and then Louisiana; chunks of his blubber mailed to Galveston, ears are chiseled out and taken to Woods Hole. The bones are left for the Whaling Museum to claim for the public and in some way for the nineteenth century.¹³ Was he a tipping point, his singular death enough to send the blue whale population into a slow spiral of decay? How could we tell when the blue whales move in ways that are still so unknown, spending only a fraction of their lives at the surface, so far beyond the reach of the coast?¹⁴ The oceans, vulnerable, remain vast.

This one, now, is known and seen intimately, in parts. But at the Whaling Museum the size and suspension of it are not the only ways that this blue whale affects the visitors to the library. As soon as a visitor enters the atrium, maybe before they notice the skeleton itself, they are created with a strange scent. And looking up at the skeleton, something out of place: a slender strand of clear plastic piping descends from the bones and empties into a clear container shaped almost like a vase. Red-gold liquid that in memory glows fills the base of it. It’s the oil, still running from the bones – the whale may be dead, but it is far from inert, and that scent is the evidence of its continued vibrancy. It smells bad, because it is a dead thing.¹⁵

And here it is, just an echo. An echo of the agonies of its death, of the immense and focused care that went into preserving its bones. What would it have sounded like? Would it have been audible through the encompassing roar of the tanker’s engines? But if not heard then surely felt – a sudden island in the storm. Maybe you ask, where did it come from and why was it there? In being worked the sea comes clearer, known daily and deeply, but the animate otherness of it grows more understood and therefore more occluded. Not that the question is wrong to ask, but that to those who are most familiar with a totality of it, the sea and the creatures that make it their home are known through being unable to be explained.

The plastic pipeline of oil, the smell of death, are breaches into not just the present but the solid terrestriality of most visitors. Here we have a museum, which allows you to visit the past by creating distance from it, by presenting

¹¹ Information about the skeleton’s organs can be found at the New Bedford Whaling Museum’s website, at <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/explore/exhibitions/current/skeletons-of-the-deep/kobo> – this is a best approximation of the story, which is not fully known.

¹² Mark Johnson, “Experts unravel mystery of blue whale’s death,” *South Coast Today*, December 6, 1998.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Information about the blue whales found on the New Bedford Whaling Museum website, at <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/explore/exhibitions/current/skeletons-of-the-deep/kobo>.

¹⁵ “The oozing whale skeleton of New Bedford.” *Atlas Obscura*.

it as distinct with delimited connections to the present that are for the most part to be understood intellectually. The scent is also a sign, and through the opening it makes from this whale's past and the implicit echo of New Bedford's nineteenth-century past stream all the other echoes, tangible and intangible. What is felt and known about the whale at the moment of encounter combines with the fabric of its life and afterlife, and that faint discomfort or even disgust it evokes is as important as the other emanations it leaks into the atmosphere.

The museum's other skeletons seem more cooperative.

Their bones, thoroughly dried, greet visitors from a more distant remove. Not *whales*, quite, shorn so completely and cleanly from life and rot alike. Hanging like this, what can they say? Perhaps, for a second, or the rush of feeling only a fragment of that, they live again. Bones suddenly enfolded in veins and muscle, heaving casing of blubber protecting the great heart and guts from the cold –

Different now, transformed by their death and diffusion, they stretch and slam their tails against the air, crashing into glass display cases, knocking harpoons and sailors' valentines from the crowded walls. The sperm whale in particular (the only toothed whale in the bunch, the hunter scarred by battle with giant squid), in this place so in awe of his fictional-factual counterpart, snaps a plastic version of a blue whale's artery in half with its long jaw. Soon after – a split-second after – attention pulls to some other chunk of history on the wall; flash of life is gone.

These skeletons hang in their places, their placedness, echoes streaming behind them and into the future. They have told and are still telling all sorts of stories, through the movement or stillness of their bodies, through vanished song still echoing as part of the wave-patterns of the sea, through microscope and image and examination, through the sheer shock of seeing for the first time what it means

to be vast. Or perhaps to simply be confused by what these dried bones are meant to call forth.

It's a shame I couldn't have touched those bones. It's a shame I couldn't have stood with my eyes squinted against smoke or acrid chemicals. It's a shame the tanker, and the time, and the churn of the sea – but I can still remember all of it.

a conclusion –

History fixes the coast; a chart-sharp line over watery grounds that heave and shift and move, unevenly. But it might hold at once, also, many distances: Memory muddies and is muddied; it flashes and subsides, burns, is burned, is buried. Something is impossible here. Not wholly – haven't you gone and returned again? – but enough that an unreachable and shifting core remains. The lines change every day, are changing more than that. Ink-stained pages further stained with salt-water can blend to a point where they're still legible, and then past that. I watch them float out around me as I stand in the shallows, breathed in and out by the tide, hands at my side, touched and touching.

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